

Kairos and Stasis Revisited: Heuristics for the Critically Informed Composition Classroom



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It is not an uncommon scenario for a student assigned an argumentative paper in the composition classroom to appropriate a “hot” topic from the currency of public discourse, one for which they often already have a pre-formed opinion that becomes codified simultaneously with the need to formulate a thesis. With thesis thus pre-determined, research is approached as primarily a process by which to identify and accumulate material to match the pre-determined position, while any serious consideration of the legitimacy of the opposition is equated with the need to conform to convention and, therefore, with what are often only superficial concessions. In this scenario, there is no genuine dialogic engagement and the activity of argument, thus narrowly conceived, is reduced to a formal contest among what must necessarily be winners and losers. Why, then, are we surprised when students seek to identify with winners and we are faced with grading the “canned” papers we know only too well?

There is, however, nothing particularly *natural* about the above “canned” scenario, although, arguably, the proliferation of radio and television pundits exerts a cultural influence that may predispose students to think of persuasion and argument in combative terms. My point, though, is that what is often a mode and skills based teaching approach in the “canned” scenario is, itself, a fairly reliable predictor of the abysmal products it inspires. This needn’t be the situation, however, for a change in the philosophy and teaching approach of the composition course can change not only final research products, but it can also change students’ experiences of what it means to do research. An alternative scenario that builds a conception of invention into the philosophical, curricular framework of the composition course and that relies on this same conception of invention to guide students’ rhetorical enactments through writing can, I argue, disrupt the “canned” process/response cycle and accomplish the favorable changes I’ve identified.

The method of invention to achieve this disruption can be found by revisiting the classical concepts of *kairos* and *stasis*. Simply put, *kairos* involves the right word at the opportune moment. Indeed, James Kinneavy describes it as “the appropriateness of the discourse to the particular circumstances of the time, place, speaker, and audience involved” (84). *Kairos* thus serves two roles: it provides the time and situation in which the rhetorical act occurs and it contains the generative impetus, i.e., the tension or dissonance, for discourse (Poulakos).

Stasis, on the other hand, is a strategy to accurately identify the tension or dissonance at which discourse *ought* to begin. Effectively, it functions as a practical method “based on the established laws and customs of any given people” (Hermogenes) for disputing issues. Associated with forensic rhetoric in the classical tradition, *stasis* provides a theoretically grounded strategy whereby opposing parties can identify the exact point—existence, quality, procedure/policy—at which they disagree. Without this agreement about the point of issue, there can be no rhetoric. Thus, Janice Lauer eloquently says of *stasis* that it is “the inventional art of beginning well” (127). *Stasis* and *kairos*, then, are not discrete principles, as the two function inter-dependently.

In this article, I revisit the classical concepts of *kairos* and *stasis* and contend that reconsidering them in light of cultural studies, critical, and postmodern theory provides an ethical framework for the composition course and an effective heuristic to guide students’ dialogic engagements. Indeed, I maintain that *kairos* and *stasis* can alter the epistemology and subject positions of students, enlarge our own pedagogical conceptions, and contribute to a different sort of composition course, one that enacts the same critical ethic it would ideally have students adopt as their own.

In what follows, I first provide a brief historical overview of the principles of *kairos* and *stasis*, tracing the issues that have obtained within them to suggest that these issues continue to resonate today. Next, I build upon Michael Carter’s argument in “*Stasis and Kairos: Principles of Social Construction in Classical Rhetoric*” to argue that *kairos* and *stasis* are not only conceptually consonant with the goals and purposes of cultural studies, critical, and postmodern theory, but that they also enhance these theories to provide an ethical framework for the composition course. Last, I illustrate the benefits and challenges of these rhetorical principles as heuristics that can positively affect students’ epistemologies and subject roles, as well as the space of the critical composition classroom, itself.

Historical Perspectives of *Kairos* and *Stasis* {1}

Even a cursory tracing of the role of *kairos* and *stasis* in different historical conceptions of rhetoric illuminates the close relationship between these principles and the way epistemology or the construction of knowledge is conceived to occur. And inherent in any notion of epistemology is, of course, the role and degree of agency attributed to individuals. For example, in sophistic rhetoric, Gorgian *kairos* was articulated as having three fundamental qualities. The first focused on language, the field in which all humanity was believed to exist; the second focused on community, as it was reasoned that individuals could not exist apart from the world; and the third focused on situational context, since the eternal was a moot concept. Therefore, knowledge, which could be produced only within the province of language in the here and now, was viewed as necessarily contingent and probable. And while no explicit articulation of an art of invention for making knowledge exists for this system, the sophists did use strategies such as *dissoi logoi*, which is itself one form of *stasis*. For the sophists, then, epistemology was thoroughly rhetorical, as it was contingent on the social discourse used by people in specific contexts in specific historical moments.

In the work of Plato, however, the relevance of *kairos* and *stasis* was severely reduced, as the privileged individual (always a philosopher) and the eternal were elevated and language was debased as merely a less than ideal way to transmit Truth (the transcendent sort, with a capital "T"). Therefore, relative to *kairos*, the philosopher had only to grasp "the concept of propriety of time—when to speak and when to hold his tongue" (64), while relative to *stasis*, inspiration supplanted the art of invention. That is, "stargazing" to learn "the nature of things" (Plato 60) was the inspirational method recommended to the elite individual by which to access Truth. "Others" could, however, learn something of received Truth from the privileged philosopher through the process *oi* — dialectic, a formal, logical system of argumentation from first principles, universal essences, and truisms (Enos). Epistemology in this conception fell entirely within the realm of philosophy, while rhetoric was reduced to a role of mere transmission of the philosopher's elicited Truth.

In Aristotle's system of rhetoric, neither *kairos* nor *stasis* was explicitly strategized, but there is evidence that both concepts exist. For example, Aristotle mentions "propriety" (222) and "one word [being] more proper than another" (225), and *stasis* is at least implicit, since the rhetor had to determine if and when the subject had reached *stasis*, as there could be no rhetoric, otherwise. Significantly, Aristotle recognized invention as being central to rhetoric, and he recognized inquiry as a legitimate process in arriving at probable knowledge. And even though he believed that Truth did exist, he maintained that it manifested itself in everyday life. He argued, then, that if people knew the facts, they would desire the truth and could be persuaded of it. Thus, Aristotle effectively rendered epistemology as functioning in a domain shared by both philosophy and rhetoric.

In the medieval period, of which Augustine is a representative figure, all knowledge was believed to reside in the province of God and could be accessed only through an individualistic, hermeneutical investigation of the scriptures (122) or through inspiration (168). Therefore, *kairos* was effectively, a non-issue, as Augustine advised to "take no thought how or what to speak: for it shall be given you in that hour what to speak" (140). In this rhetoric, *kairos* was determined by God, alone, and invention was eclipsed by the rhetor's faith and belief in God. Knowledge, then, was not made but divinely discovered or bestowed.

In the Renaissance, Peter Ramus developed a positivist approach, arguing that epistemology was an issue of scientific logic, not rhetoric. Thus, he argued that invention was not properly a function of rhetoric at all but was instead the sole province of dialectic. Further, he maintained that all invention and arrangement could be reduced to finding the appropriate parts of syllogisms and that every art was divisible and learnable when the movement was from the general to the particular. Rhetoric was thus severely diminished by Ramus to consist of style and delivery only. In this scheme, rhetoric held not even a hint of epistemological potential.

But during the Renaissance, Cicero's *De Oratore* was re-discovered. In it, Cicero articulated a philosophy of practical reasoning, as well as a dialogic/dialectic conception of invention. He maintained that every subject contains a controversy, which can be mediated through *stasis*. Attractive to the Renaissance humanists, Cicero's work was then used to promote the argument that philosophy was subordinate to rhetoric. Claiming autonomous epistemological ground for rhetoric, the humanists attempted to counter the damage to rhetoric that Ramus had inflicted.

As is evident from this tracing, the treatment of *kairos* and *stasis* through its specific rationalization of epistemology in different characterizations of rhetoric serves as a benchmark for particular conceptions of rhetoric's domain and scope. And, not incidental to these rationalizations of epistemology are the role of language and the degree of agency conceded to the rhetor. What is not as obvious, perhaps, is that the breadth and depth of systems of rhetoric

have also historically waxed and waned according to the degree that democracy was viable in the cultures of which they were part.

These issues—the role of language, the nature of epistemology, the rhetor's possibilities for making knowledge, and the relationship of democracy and rhetoric—are as equally pertinent and important to us now as they ever were in classical times. *Kairos* and *stasis*, then, have historically been and continue today to be key considerations for the sort of rhetoric we promote in the composition classroom, for the nature of epistemology to which we subscribe, for the subject roles we envision for students, and for the quality to which we aspire for our classroom space.

***Kairos* and *Stasis* as Ethical Framework**

I appropriate here Michael Carter's argument in "*Stasis and Kairos : Principles of Social Construction in Classical Rhetoric*" that *kairos* and *stasis* are principles of social construction, a theory that holds that "knowledge is not absolute; it is contingent, a construct of a community, and is defined by the discourse of that community" (110). Indeed, Carter maintains that we often view classical rhetoric as "narrow, individualistic, mechanistic, and rationalistic," but that we ought to look beyond this view and study the assumptions that informed the principles and procedures of this tradition. Studying the principles of *kairos* and *stasis* has, I believe and as Carter contends, "the potential for powerful insights into rhetoric and into the rhetorical dimensions of knowledge" (110). My purpose in using Carter's work is to draw upon the values in cultural studies, critical, and postmodern theories to re-consider the range of possibility in which *kairos* and *stasis* might function in the space of today's critically informed composition classroom. I then relate these possibilities to the benefits that accrue to both the critically informed composition classroom and to students.

Carter situates the origin of *kairos* in the Pythagorean belief in a dualistic universe (form and matter), describing its function as the generative, binding principle between agonistic opposites. This function could, however, only be accomplished according to an overall sense of rightness, i.e., a critical point in time and space. *Kairos*, so conceived, thus provided the ethical basis for rhetoric, as the appropriateness of conflicting elements to create and justify the impetus for the rhetorical act within a specific situation constituted a judgment. The four primary characteristics of this notion of *kairos*, then, include (1) a reality informed by the logic of binaries; (2) a fixed critical moment; (3) the acts of creation, justification, and judgment; and (4) the commitment to an ethic. With only slight modification, these characteristics can be made consonant for the critically informed composition classroom, as well.

The Pythagorean notion of reality that Carter describes is, admittedly, problematic due to its bifurcation. If, however, we modify this logic of binaries, situating the polar terms of the binary along the extreme positions of a continuum, additional spaces are opened in which *kairos* can function. Such an expansion coincides with the values of cultural studies, critical, and postmodern theories that would be equally valued in the critically informed composition classroom. That is, cultural studies views the scope of its domain of study as the whole of culture: "it is committed to the study of the entire range of a society's arts, beliefs, institutions, and communicative practices" (Grossberg 4) and refuses to capitulate to arbitrary distinctions of high/low. Critical theory seeks to challenge the stability of hegemonic common-sense (see Gramsci and Villanueva), in part, by creating spaces from which the traditionally marginalized can speak and gain visibility. And postmodern theory advocates that we view any positioning as arbitrary, as always already situated, partial, and contingent due to the necessity of "fixing" at a specific space at a specific time, so that the reception of claims issued from such positioning is, therefore, likewise qualified (see Derrida, Lyotard). Critical cultural studies theory embraces postmodern anti-foundationalism but insists that in order to conduct our lives with meaning, we must act (create, justify) according to some ethic to assume responsibility for our culture (see Giroux, Aronowitz, McLaren, and Williams). Henry Giroux says that a critical, discursive practice recognizes that "the identities of 'others' matter as part of a progressive set of politics and practices aimed at the reconstruction of democratic public life" (368). These values—the disregard for distinctions of high/low culture; the challenge of hegemonic practices to create new spaces; the knowledge that meaning is always situated, partial, and contingent; an anti-foundationalist attitude guided by an ethic—then, inform the critical, composition classroom in which a reformulated notion of *kairos* is operative.

The primary benefit of this notion of *kairos* for composition students is that it exposes the facile nature of many pro/con, binary arguments. An awareness of the existence of multiple positions, situated specifically but differently along a continuum of value, each of which speaks from a situated ethic, expands students' capacity to envision alternatives to pro/con positions. That the majority of these sites remain opaque to public awareness can, itself, constitute, for students, an object of inquiry. In the process of writing these spaces, students act to create and justify the legitimacy of various positions, persuading their readers to a favorable judgment of rhetorical timing, to a

favorable judgment of the merits of their inquiry, to a favorable judgment of *kairos*. But, as previously discussed, *kairos* and *stasis* are not discrete activities; they exist in relation.

Carter offers as evidence of the historical relationship between *kairos* and *stasis* these similarities: both serve a role within opposing forces, *stasis* as the question at issue among competing arguments and *kairos* in the manner that for every *logos*, there is the possibility for an equally reasonable and opposing *logos* to manifest itself. Both imply at least a temporary standstill necessary to stimulate rhetorical action. As guides to conflict resolution, guides in that they drive the whole of the discourse, they also impose criteria for judgment—what is? what is good? what is possible?—which are necessarily culture bound and thus socially constructed.

The types of judgment are, however, different for the two principles. The judgment applied to *kairos* is nonrational, determined by both the rhetor and the audience, and is based on the exigence of the immediate situation. The judgment applied to *stasis*, conversely, is more formally conferred, e.g., by a judge or a group of legislators, and is based on the rationality of appeals. *Kairos* and *stasis*, Carter concludes, represent two systems of inquiry characterized by two different epistemologies: *kairos* partakes of relativism and *stasis* of rationalism. An ethical, rhetorical approach must include both epistemologies. *Kairos* provides the impetus for the initiation of discourse in the situation and *stasis* is the situated negotiation of the situation, itself. Exigence calls into play an unaddressed dissonance that temporally exists and for which the right word is required for negotiation of the dissonance. The right word, however, must be based on judgment and careful planning.

Stasis, as a rational method by which rhetors identify areas of disagreement, points to be argued, and issues on which cases hinge, Carter says, consists of a set of questions posed in a particular order to establish the nature of the issue as fact, definition, quality, or procedure/policy. *Stasis* grows out of the conflict between opposing forces, occupying a space of both cause and effect, which implies action, since this is also the place where rhetoric begins. As a doctrine of inquiry, *stasis* determines an accurate point of contention, an impasse, and provides the rhetorical questions necessary to focus differing views. *Stasis* is a means of resolving dissonance or conflict, since the right question is the implicit goal of discourse and is a prerequisite to the answer that would constitute a resolution. And, as previously discussed, *stasis* is situational; it defines the rhetorical situation and responds with discourse appropriate to that situation. *Stasis*, in the classical sense, requires perhaps greater qualification than *kairos* in order to serve the critical, cultural studies, and postmodern goals of the critically informed composition classroom I recommend for consideration. Nevertheless, *stasis* merits a prominent role as a critical, pedagogical strategy.

Carter's description of classical *stasis* may be alarming to some due to the rational impulse that informs its very nature. Terms such as "cause/effect," and "resolution" suggest a modernist agenda, counter to the theories of critical, cultural studies and postmodernism. The linearity suggested by "cause/effect," for example, is, we know, a convenient but simplified notion of the machinations of power, the complexity of which is often difficult to chart and even more difficult to articulate. Nevertheless, the term does accurately depict the rhetor's need to identify a point, a "cause" of contention from which to begin discussion. The "effect" of the discussion, however, is not a categorical given. It is rather a *judgment*, unique to each situation which, regardless of the value of the judgment, does constitute a rhetorical "effect."

"Resolution," is more problematic, I believe, due to the context of the simplified pro/con argumentation in which many students participate, a context in which the term does accurately represent an attempt to erase difference. Postmodern theory tells us this desire to erase difference is nothing less than Utopian, while critical and cultural studies theory tells us it is morally and ethically indefensible. A qualification to "resolution," therefore, is required. *Stasis* requires a question or point around which to situate discussion; it temporarily freezes, a necessity for not only a rhetorical starting point but also a necessity of the rhetor's desire to persuade. "Resolution" has everything to do with this desire and the nature of the desired persuasion can take many forms short of the "no holes barred win" stance we so often synonymously associate with resolution.

For example, the rhetor may, in the process of inquiry, identify a more basic point of *stasis* than that around which public discourse has theretofore revolved. Questions regarding conjecture or the nature of reality, we know from *stasis* theory, are more fundamental than questions regarding quality or procedure. Virginia Anderson's point is well taken in such a situation: the lesson of *stasis* theory, she says, is that it is counterproductive to confront people on issues of value or policy "while such complex questions of conjecture and definition are hanging fire" (211). Therefore, an expanded notion of "resolution" in such circumstances might well then be the persuasion of all involved parties to the recognition and acceptance that the issue for debate should, indeed, be altered. If all parties are persuaded to accept this argument, that particular issue of persuasion, itself, becomes a commonplace upon which they agree. This is a "resolution," albeit a temporary one, perhaps, in the environment of multiple issues that characterize complex problems. It is, however, definitely a resolution to the specific issue the rhetor has engaged.

Another example of "resolution" could occur where definition is the point of issue in *stasis*. Say, perhaps, the

contextual issue is whether a particular group warrants inclusion into a specific category such as “marginalized” or “oppressed,” categories that often play important roles in policy decisions. The rhetor would then need to persuasively define marginalization in an argument to justify the group’s legitimate claim to be so identified and considered.

Kairos and *stasis* thus conceived can not only provide pedagogical strategies that help students to write more effectively but also provide strategies that help students to think better and to think *differently*. The historical context for *stasis*, Enos writes, is forensic oratory, a source of political power. In litigation, the goal was equity, “which was aimed at readjusting an imbalanced situation through an interpretation of existing laws upon a point of issue,” while justice had a more generic grounding as “the virtuous condition of balance upon which a society was built” (392). Equity, justice, and power are notions that students should confront in composition courses and interiorize according to the extent that their own discourses of inquiry persuade them to an identification with “others.” Equity, justice, and power ought to become for our students much more than mere abstractions.

***Kairos* and *Stasis* as Effective Heuristics:**

The benefits and challenges of *kairos* and *stasis* as heuristics involve all the relations that obtain in the composition classroom: the philosophical framework of the course, students’ roles, teachers’ roles, pedagogy, epistemology, and the classroom as ideological site. *Kairos* and *stasis*, I maintain, are just as pertinent for our approaches to the composition classroom as they are to written discourse, since I believe we would all concede that classrooms are rhetorical situations and that pedagogies are contested methods by which we attempt to persuade students to approach writing in the manner we as teachers value as best.

In her article, “Confrontational Teaching and Rhetorical Practice,” Virginia Anderson argues a salient point: as teachers we often slight the process of persuasion, assuming that students will adopt our theoretical frames, which we erroneously posit as starting points. Perhaps our assumption is a manifestation of an hegemony we as authority figures tacitly bring into the classroom. We forget that our self-views of our theoretical frames as counter-hegemonic, when imposed from positions of authority into ideological spaces where we accrue disproportionately higher degrees of power, can appear and feel very hegemonic to students. This is not to say, however, that we are relieved of the responsibility and obligation to promote, with conviction, the values and beliefs we deem appropriate for our students and our culture. Fredric Gale, for example, writes that “we who teach must undertake out of a sense of personal responsibility to teach not only how to think but even what to think *about*” (163, emphasis added; see also Bizzell and Jarratt). And while confrontation may, at times, be necessary and even productive, it does not serve as a pedagogical base nearly so well as the employment of the rhetorical strategy of persuasion. *Kairos* and *stasis*, as pedagogies, enhance this persuasive goal.

Kairos and *stasis* set in motion the action of inquiry, of search, of exploration and investigation beyond the management frames students are often confined to in a traditional composition class. In this envisioned version of the critically informed classroom, however, the pedagogy explicitly directs students toward certain activities. The hope is that the process of engaging these activities will lead students not just to awareness and/or to empathy but to genuine identification with “others” and with “difference,” frames that they adopt on the authority of their own experience, with what Anderson calls “inner authority” (210). This process gives students what Lynch, George, and Cooper characterize as “the chance to discover that complex issues have the potential to involve us in unexpected alliances through which we can open ourselves to new possibilities and responsibilities” (69). In this critically informed composition classroom, then, confrontation is more likely to occur within students as they engage contesting opinions. The point is that it is the process that critical, rhetorical pedagogies of *kairos* and *stasis* initiate and sustain that more productively confronts students, not teachers and not theory, abstracted.

The climate of such a composition classroom, then, changes. Students assume greater agency and, indeed, they are faced with assuming the responsibility that agency requires. Teachers, whose personalities and teaching styles may be antithetical to confrontational and/or didactic methods, but who, nevertheless, desire a critical, cultural studies curriculum have the pedagogical tools to engender this goal. Epistemology broadens, so that rational, non-rational, and affective elements are equally valued.

Benefits and Challenges in the Critically Informed Composition Classroom

In the critically informed composition classroom I have described, students are guided toward the use of critical and ethical tools, the principles of *kairos* and *stasis*, by which to practice genuine inquiry into “difference” and “otherness,” rather than being left to adopt the adversarial stance that too often is the only discourse option offered them. In this classroom, students become critical rhetors, knowledge-makers, engaging in a notion of dialectic as a transductive relationship between discourse and knowledge, which “implies that knowledge can be created in the activity of discourse, because it is potentially changed by that activity” (Gage 156). Here, students can learn that an adversarial pro/con argument often leads to a state of gridlock, where participants no longer even hear each other (Kroll 24). They can learn that such a situation might be mediated by “sincere and generous listening,” or by the realization that differing perspectives do, indeed, share some common interest, or by the insight that weighing multiple options to a problem before pursuing, uncritically, a specific course of action is beneficial to everyone potentially affected by the problem (Kroll). This classroom, then, becomes a context in which students engage an act in which they are empowered both to persuade others to change their minds and to simultaneously risk having their own minds changed.

Keith Gilyard maintains that we must exercise scrutiny, which he characterizes as “intellectual moves,” of the “ongoing consideration of the participant structure of classrooms” (236). The use of *kairos* and *stasis*, I maintain, constitutes an example of intellectual moves that would require us to re-consider the rhetorical, epistemological, ethical, and social consequences of our pedagogy. Enacting these intellectual moves embodies the potential to transform the traditional composition course into a different sort of space, a space where knowledge is recognized as always situated, partial, and contingent, a space that allows students to inquire into the multiple and competing *relevant* positions that characterize complex issues rather than to merely pursue “topics” through pro/con mechanical investigations of the two most *prevalent* positions. It is a site that encourages students to extend themselves beyond the transmission of knowledge toward a praxis of knowledge-making. It is a space that changes what can be known, how it can be known, and the ethical value of the constructed known. In James Berlin’s terms, it is a space that interrogates “what is real, what is good, what is possible, and how power ought to be distributed” (492). It is, in short, a critically informed, rhetorical composition classroom, a space that values and rewards the genuinely dialogical processes of inquiry. But, equally important, it is a composition classroom that embodies and enacts the very principles it would have students embrace.

Notes

1. For a rich discussion of the differing scholarship on *kairos* and *stasis/status*, see Janice Lauer’s *Invention in Rhetoric and Composition*. ([Return to text.](#))

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